

Environmental Health Talk

In order to help citizens understand more clearly many of the environmental health issues in Ravalli County and the role of the Environmental Health Department in addressing these issues, our department will run a series of weekly newspaper articles titled “Environmental Health Talk.”

In this ongoing series we hope to help raise the community’s awareness of issues such as air and water quality and give readers useful tips on topics like recycling, collecting and disposing of hazardous materials and maintaining septic systems, just to name a few. To this end, we welcome public comment. If there’s an environmental health issue you’d like us to address, write call or email the department: RCEH, c/o “EnviroHealth Talk,” 215 South 4th St, Suite D, Hamilton MT 59840. Phone: 375-6571. Email: rdaniel@ravallicounty.mt.gov

Air Quality

Due to the noticeably poor air quality of late in the Bitterroot Valley, our office has received plenty of calls from folks asking if it’s safe to go outside. And while we can’t make that call for anyone, we can give people the tools to make educated decisions about whether they want to breathe the outside air.

The Ravalli County Air Quality Hotline – 375-6577 – is updated regularly throughout the day based on our own observations of air quality in downtown Hamilton. The hotline rates air by the following six health-effect categories and offers cautionary statements when necessary:

GOOD – (No cautionary statement)

MODERATE – (No cautionary statement)

UNHEALTHY FOR SENSITIVE GROUPS – People with respiratory or heart disease, the elderly, and children should avoid prolonged exertion; everyone else should limit prolonged exertion.

VERY UNHEALTHY – People with respiratory or heart disease, the elderly, and children should avoid any outdoor activity; everyone else should avoid prolonged exertion.

HAZARDOUS – Everyone should avoid any outdoor exertion; people with respiratory or heart disease, the elderly, and children should remain indoors.

The Environmental Health Department’s Web site -- www.ravallicounty.mt.gov/environmental -- has seven different air quality links to help people understand the nature of, origin of, and forecast for air quality in their specific part of the valley as well as across the state of Montana:

- (1) “Today’s Air Quality” basically gives you the same general information as the Hotline.
- (2) “DEQ’s Air Quality Monitoring Data” takes you to the state’s Web site and allows you to get “snapshot” data of particulates measured at the monitoring station atop the Ravalli County Courthouse in Hamilton. Its limitations are the time lag from when the reading is

taken (usually 10 a.m.) to when it's observed (often later in the day) and the fact that it is only a snapshot in time.

- (3) "Health Effect Categories" again takes you to DEQ's Website where the aforementioned categories are explained more thoroughly.
- (4) "Forest Fire Air Quality Updates" allows you to track the sources of the smoke on a daily basis across the state. It gives smoke advisories updated each day as of 10 a.m., satellite images of active fires, mapped hotspots across the state, and an updated forecast. This DEQ Website also discusses Visibility Guidelines, whereby people can determine visibility based on the visibility of local landmarks. It is perhaps the most useful of the links.
- (5) "Air Quality for Schools" is linked to Google Earth and offers satellite images with concentric visibility maps superimposed on many of the valley's schools. It's a little difficult to read because the visibility maps block out much of the satellite imagery.
- (6) "Air Quality For Schools Map" gives a very practical mapped image, useful in determining air quality in each school district.
- (7) "Guide to Wildfire Smoke" is a highly useful, 15-page primer on the nature, composition, characteristics and health effects of smoke produced by wildfires. Included is a section on judging particulate levels, as well as specific strategies for coping with smoke, such as using air conditioners, air cleaners and filter masks.

Visibility Measurements

We encourage everyone, when making decisions regarding outdoor activity, to use the Department of Environmental Quality air quality Visibility Guidelines. "Miles of visibility" is the measurement used to identify air quality conditions and is a handy tool for the public to assess local conditions.

For instance, the "Corvallis C" is approximately 3 miles from the Corvallis schools campus. If it can't be seen from the school because of smoke, the air quality conditions are, at a minimum, UNHEALTHY (visibility 1.5-2.5 miles).

By identifying landmarks of known distance from your home or school, you can determine the air quality just as accurately as we can. Below are the Visibility Guidelines and their corresponding categories:

<u>Visibility</u>	<u>Health Effect Category</u>
10 miles and up	Good
6 to 9 miles	Moderate
3 to 5 miles	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups
1.5 to 2.5 miles	Unhealthy
.9 to 1.4 miles	Very Unhealthy
.8 miles or less	Hazardous

Whether people venture outdoors during these smoky times is a personal choice that may affect their health. People with heart disease, respiratory problems or other health issues should be mindful of the dangers of breathing smoky air.

We hope that by using these tools, people can make their own determination about air quality and make the best choice for themselves and their family.